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# BACK BAY ARCHITECTURAL COMMISSION

## GUIDELINES FOR THE RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT

Adopted February 14, 1990; Effective February 14, 1990.



# BACK BAY ARCHITECTURAL DISTRICT - RESIDENTIAL GUIDELINES

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. GENERAL GUIDELINES	2
3. DEMOLITION	3
4. NEW CONSTRUCTION	3
5. CORNICES	3
6. ROOFS	3
7. REAR YARDS	4
8. WINDOWS	5
9. MASONRY	6
10. DOORS AND ENTRANCES	7
11. SIGNS, AWNINGS, AND CANOPIES	8
12. LANDSCAPING	8
13. IRONWORK	8
14. UTILITY EQUIPMENT	9
15. PUBLIC AREAS	10
16. BIBLIOGRAPHY	10
17. GLOSSARY	11

These guidelines apply to the residential portion of the Back Bay Architectural District. Guidelines for the commercial portion of the district, and further information, are available from the City of Boston Environment Department, Boston City Hall, Room 805, Boston, Mass. 02201. Telephone 617/725-3850.





☐ RESIDENTIAL  
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## BACK BAY ARCHITECTURAL COMMISSION

### GUIDELINES FOR THE RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT

The purpose of these guidelines is to encourage appropriate maintenance and restoration in the Back Bay Residential District and to inform the public concerning general procedures and practices of the Back Bay Architectural Commission and the criteria by which it reviews applications in the district, applied in light of the purposes and criteria set forth in the Enabling Act, St. 1966, Ch. 625, as amended. Persons contemplating any exterior work must obtain approval from the commission prior to commencing work\*. The commission will act in accordance with the following guidelines, although each application is reviewed on a case by case basis.

#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 **AUTHORITY** The General Court in 1966 passed an act establishing the Back Bay Architectural District and the Back Bay Architectural Commission, a commission presently within the City's Environment Department (Chapter 625 of the Acts of 1966 as amended). This act enables the commission to review all exterior changes to buildings within the district. The area of its jurisdiction is within the boundaries of the centerlines of Back Street on the north, Embankment Road and Arlington Streets on the east, Boylston Street on the south, and Charlesgate East on the west. The residential portion of the district, with which these guidelines are concerned, is that portion which is zoned for residential use and which lies north of the alley between Commonwealth Avenue and Newbury Street.

1.2 **PURPOSE** The purpose of the Back Bay Architectural Commission, as defined by its statute is:

"(a) to promote the economic, cultural, educational and general welfare of the public through high standards of design throughout the Back Bay and through the preservation of the residential portion of the Back Bay area in the City of Boston; (b) to safeguard the heritage of the City of Boston by preventing the despoliation of a district in that city which reflects important elements of its cultural, social, economic and political history; (c) to stabilize and strengthen residential property values in such area; (d) to foster civic beauty; and (e) to strengthen the economy of the Commonwealth and the City of Boston."

1.3 **MEMBERSHIP** The Back Bay Architectural Commission is made up of nine commissioners and five alternates appointed by the Mayor from nominations by the Back Bay Association, the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay, the Boston Society of Architects, the Greater Boston Real Estate Board, and the Mayor's Office.

\*See Application Procedures, Section 1.5; for definitions of certain terms, see Glossary, Section 17.





1.4 APPLICATION PROCEDURES Owners contemplating exterior changes to their properties should contact the Environment Department (City Hall, Room 805, 725-3850) to obtain an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness. The commission holds a public hearing on the second Wednesday of each month to determine the appropriateness of proposed alterations. Applications must be received at least two weeks before a hearing to be scheduled for review; incomplete applications will not be heard. Any proposed change will be reviewed in relation to the building as a whole and to its context. When changes to a condominium or other building in multiple ownership are proposed, the entire building shall be considered and treated uniformly. The commission requires that all regulatory concerns, including zoning, building code, and environmental issues, be resolved prior to architectural review, although informal advisory review may be allowed at the discretion of the commission. No applications for Certificates of Appropriateness will be approved where outstanding architectural violations exist.

1.5 COMPLIANCE Certificates of Appropriateness are valid for one year. Construction shall comply with the drawings and plans approved by the commission. Changes to approved plans must be reviewed by the commission before construction. Failure to comply with approved plans will invalidate a Certificate.

## 2.0 GENERAL GUIDELINES

2.1 CHARACTER The Back Bay, in spite of its many variations in architectural style, is distinguished by a consistency of character, form and scale. This unity was established by the original deed restrictions on building height, setback, and materials, which assured the development of a continuous street facade, regular cornice lines, and a repetitive pattern of projecting bays and oriel windows.

2.2 CRITERIA Proposed changes shall respect the predominant characteristics of the district, including forms, proportional relationships, colors, and materials. Historic materials and features shall be maintained and repaired rather than replaced.

2.3 APPLICATION OF CRITERIA Alterations to primary elevations (facades), other than restoration, are inappropriate. On secondary elevations, alterations in conformance with these guidelines may be appropriate. Alterations which are not visible from the street also fall within the commission's jurisdiction.

2.4 REPLACEMENT OF ELEMENTS Replacement of missing architectural features should be based on evidence of the original features, substantiated by physical and pictorial information. Proposals for new work should be based on evidence of appropriate detail with regard to size, shape, material, design, color and texture. Alteration or removal of inappropriate elements is encouraged. All work shall be executed with the highest quality materials and workmanship.





### 3.0 DEMOLITION

3.1 OF HISTORIC STRUCTURES Demolition of historic structures is prohibited in the residential portion of the district.

3.2 OF PORTIONS OF STRUCTURES Partial demolition may be considered acceptable where it involves an inappropriate alteration or addition to a building. Removal of architecturally significant features and alterations to historic facades are inappropriate.

### 4.0 NEW CONSTRUCTION

4.1 CRITERIA All new construction, whether of entire buildings or additions to existing buildings, should be designed to harmonize with the predominant characteristics of the district in height, mass, setback, rhythm, scale, proportions and materials.

4.2 HEIGHT Building height shall reflect the dominant cornice heights of surrounding buildings.

4.3 SETBACK New buildings shall observe the historic front and rear yard setbacks, and shall occupy the full width of their primary frontage or frontages.

### 5.0 CORNICES

5.1 CRITERIA The historic cornice line shall be maintained. Creation of new dominant cornice lines is inappropriate.

5.2 FORM AND MATERIALS Removal of original cornices is not allowed. Replacement cornices shall replicate the existing forms and materials.

### 6.0 ROOFS

6.1 ROOFTOP ADDITIONS In determining the appropriateness of an addition, the commission will take into consideration its visibility from any public way along direct and oblique sight lines, as well as scale, proportions, materials, and design. Original roof configurations and the dominance of historic cornice lines shall be maintained on both the front and rear elevations. Rooftop mechanical equipment and elevator overrides shall be incorporated into the volume of any proposed addition.

6.2 INAPPROPRIATE ADDITIONS Additions to buildings distinguished by complex roof forms and additions to corner buildings are discouraged. Additions to pre-existing additions, multi-story additions, and roof decks on top of roof additions are inappropriate.

6.3 PENTHOUSE DESIGN Proposals for new or renovated penthouses shall integrate with all building elevations. Appropriate materials include slate, copper, and standing seam metal; end walls which abut party walls shall be brick. Addition of a mansard to an existing mansard is inappropriate on the primary elevation. Parapet extensions to party walls and significant dimensional changes to chimneys are inappropriate.



6.4 ROOF DECKS Visibility of decks from any public way shall be minimal. Roof decks should be set back to the inward edges of the chimneys and kept as close to the roof as possible. Railings should be ornamental iron. Permanent opaque elevations such as screening and planters should not exceed the railing height and should not be visible from a public way.

6.5 ROOF ACCESS STRUCTURES New roof access structures may consist of hatches or low profile headhouses, which are minimally visible. Headhouses shall be traditional in form and minimal in dimension, and located toward the center of the building. Appropriate cladding materials include standing seam copper or dark finished metal.

6.6 SKYLIGHTS New skylights may be allowed if they have a flat or traditional mullioned shape and are minimally visible from street level. Skylights or roof windows in a mansard roof are not appropriate.

6.7 MATERIALS Replacement slate shall match the original in design, color, coursing and texture; synthetic slate and asphalt shingles are inappropriate. Roofing materials shall be non-reflective and dark in color.

## 7.0 REAR YARDS

7.1 PURPOSE These guidelines are designed to encourage alterations which facilitate the service function of the alleys while enhancing their residential character, to remove inappropriate additions, to restore historic or characteristic architectural features, to encourage landscaping, and to improve visual quality.

7.2 DESIGN CRITERIA Removal or replacement of inappropriate structures is encouraged and shall be reviewed by the commission. Building alterations shall be consistent in scale, form, proportion, detail, material, and color with the characteristic architecture of the residential district. Alterations which compound or perpetuate inappropriate structures, or which remove historic features or landscaping are inappropriate.

7.3 INAPPROPRIATE ADDITIONS Inappropriate additions include the following: additions more than one story in height, additions on top of existing additions or ells, freestanding accessory structures, stacked decks, carports, and canopies.

7.4 LANDSCAPING, FENCING AND PAVING The maintenance and addition of historic gardens and garden walls and the replacement of landscaping in rear yards and parking areas is encouraged. Rear yards and parking courts may be walled or fenced in brick, wrought iron, or vertical board painted an appropriate color. Chain link or stockade fencing, and barbed or razor wire are not appropriate. Appropriate paving materials include brick or other unit pavers; poured concrete or asphalt is inappropriate except as maintenance of an existing condition.



## 8.0 WINDOWS

**8.1 WINDOW OPENINGS** Alterations to the design and arrangement of window openings on the historic facade, other than restoration to documented historical conditions, are inappropriate. The lowering of sills on the rear elevation may be appropriate provided that the head and side jamb conditions are preserved. The introduction of openings not characteristic in proportion and scale and the blocking up of original openings are inappropriate.

**8.2 PRESERVATION** Original window material shall be retained wherever possible; if it is beyond repair, the existing openings, sash, glass, lintels, sills, shutter hardware, frames, surrounds, and all other details shall be duplicated in the same configuration, dimensions, style, and material as existing. Retention of original historic material such as curved, leaded, or stained glass is mandatory.

**8.3 COLORS** All proposed changes in paint color are subject to review. Generally, sash and frames should be dark in color. Appropriate colors for dark masonry buildings include semi-gloss black, slate gray, dark brown, dark red, gray brown, and deep green. Appropriate colors for light masonry buildings include beige, dove gray, slate blue, forest green, and black. White and cream are appropriate for Colonial Revival buildings.

**8.4 REPLACEMENT SASH** Double hung, large paned (1/1/ or 2/2) wooden replacement sash with through-glass muntins are appropriate for most buildings in the district. Openings shall not be reduced or enlarged to accommodate stock sizes or shapes. New window sash should not be divided into a smaller or larger number of lights than the original. Where the building has been altered to have several types of windows, proposed changes should be consistent with either the predominant window pattern of the building or the original historic pattern.

**8.5 INAPPROPRIATE ELEMENTS** Inappropriate replacement window elements include: multi-paned aluminum, vinyl, metal-clad or vinyl-clad replacement sash; simulated muntins, including snap-in, surface-applied, or between-glass grids; metal panning of frames; and reflective or tinted glass (except replacement stained glass). Picture, strip, sliding aluminum, jalousie and most casement windows are inappropriate. Replacement of windows with vents is inappropriate.

**8.6 ORIELS** Historic oriels shall not be removed or replaced. Oriels should be painted in subdued dark colors. Alterations to oriels on the primary elevation are inappropriate.

**8.7 STORM WINDOWS** Exterior combination storm windows should have a minimal visual impact. Storm sash shall have narrow perimeter framing which conforms to the primary window opening; the meeting rail shall align with that of the primary window. Storm window frames shall match the window frame color; clear or mill finished aluminum frames are not appropriate. Exterior storm windows are inappropriate for windows with arches, leaded glass, faceted frames, mullioned lights, or curved glass. Interior storm windows are encouraged and are not subject to review.





8.8 **EXTERIOR BLINDS** Hinged wooden blinds may be appropriate on some alley elevations. They should match the height and one-half the width of the window and replicate traditional louvered forms. They should be painted an appropriate color and properly secured with traditional hardware. On primary elevations, blinds may be considered appropriate where documentation of original installation exists.

## 9.0 **MASONRY**

9.1 **CRITERIA** Since improper cleaning and repair methods can alter and permanently damage masonry, commission review is required for all proposed masonry cleaning and repair prior to starting work.

9.2 **PRESERVATION** Masonry shall be kept as clean and dry as possible through appropriate maintenance. Since exterior sealers are generally not effective in preserving masonry and can cause permanent damage, their application is not allowed, except in extraordinary circumstances. Samples of any proposed treatment shall be reviewed by the commission before application.

9.3 **REPAIR** Original masonry should, wherever possible, be cleaned, repaired, and repointed rather than resurfaced. Small areas of masonry that may need replacement shall be patched with a material matching the original surface in texture, color, and detailing as closely as possible. Original details, carved surfaces, moldings, enframements, and cornices shall be preserved or replicated. Covering brick or stone masonry with other materials is inappropriate.

9.4 **BROWNSTONE** Brownstone may require special treatment involving replacement materials and coatings; each situation will be reviewed individually. Any replacement material must approximate brownstone in composition, appearance, and texture.

9.5 **CLEANING** The commission recommends cleaning of masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration. The most gentle cleaning method possible shall be used. Methods and specifications shall be submitted to the commission for review prior to commencing work. Wire brushing, sandblasting, and other abrasive techniques are not allowed.

9.6 **REPOINTING** New mortar shall match the color and profile of the original. Mortar shall have a high sand and lime content to preserve the softer nineteenth century brick. Methods and specifications shall be submitted to the commission for review prior to commencing work. Joints should be raked, tooled, scored, or otherwise treated to imitate older wall surfaces. Flush and smeared joints and scrub coating are not allowed. Upon completion of repointing, all excess mortar and residual film shall be removed.

9.7 **PAINT** Unpainted masonry facades shall not be painted unless the commission agrees that painting is required. Paint removal, especially from brick surfaces, is encouraged. Previously painted masonry may be repainted only in a color approved by the commission. Previously painted masonry surfaces should be tested for possible removal of the paint (in a manner approved by the commission staff) before repainting is approved. In instances where repainting of masonry trim is approved, all of the stone trim elements, including front steps, porch, basement, cornice and door and window enframements should be painted the same natural stone color. The appearance and proportions of a building should not be substantially altered by painting.



## 10.0 DOORS AND ENTRANCES

**10.1 DOOR OPENINGS** Alterations to the design, proportions and arrangement of door openings on the historic facade, other than restoration to documented historical conditions, are inappropriate. The reduction or enlargement of openings, the introduction of openings not characteristic in proportion and scale, and the blocking up of original openings are also inappropriate.

**10.2 DOORS** Every effort should be made to retain and repair original doors, transoms, and sidelights. Original doors and enframements may be refinished with an appropriate paint or stain color. Any changes in door color must be approved by commission staff. Replacement doors shall maintain the materials, proportions, and form of the original.

**10.3 INAPPROPRIATE ELEMENTS** Aluminum doors, sliding doors, flush doors, doors that reduce or enlarge the height or width of the entry, and those that are asymmetrically divided or made with textured glass, plastic panels, or colored inserts are inappropriate. Where they exist, their replacement with more historically appropriate elements is encouraged.

**10.4 STORM DOORS** Storm doors are inappropriate on a primary entrance, but may be appropriate on secondary elevations. They should be painted to match the color of the door frame. Unfinished aluminum storm doors are not appropriate to the district.

**10.5 ENTRYWAYS, PORTICOS, PORCHES AND STOOPS** Front entry vestibules, porticos, and porches shall not be altered, removed, or enclosed. Front steps shall not be rebuilt or repaired in any material or configuration other than the original stone masonry or a modern substitute similar in texture and color.

**10.6 ENTRY LIGHTING** Lighting of entryways is encouraged. Lighting fixtures should be of a style, finish, and character appropriate to the architecture of a building. Lighting should be in traditional locations: hung from the ceiling within the entryway or attached to the side panels of the entryway. Light fixtures should not be affixed to the face of the building. Exposed conduit is inappropriate. Lighting the building facade is inappropriate.

**10.7 REAR YARD LIGHTING** Lighting of rear yards and parking areas is encouraged. Fixtures should be inconspicuous and shielded to direct light downward. A white light source is more appropriate than a sodium or mercury vapor fixture. All conduit shall be concealed.

**10.8 HARDWARE AND HOUSE NUMBERS** Door hardware should replicate original forms and materials. House numbers should be brass or bronze, no more than 6 inches in height, and traditional in style. They may be painted in a dark or gold color and located on the transom above the primary entrance, or affixed to doors or rear fences. Reflective house numbers may be appropriate only in the alleys.

**10.9 MAILBOXES, BUZZERS, AND INTERCOMS.** These should be flush-mounted within the reveal of the door, rather than on the masonry facade of the building. They shall be small in size and brass or dark finish.



## 11.0 SIGNS, AWNINGS, AND CANOPIES

11.1 SIGNS In the residential district, signs that announce a service within a building shall be small, inconspicuous, formal, and restrained in design. Brass or bronze plaques are appropriate. Freestanding, projecting, lit, animated, and neon signs are not allowed in the residential district. Freestanding notice boards may be acceptable for churches. In areas zoned for business use, such as Massachusetts Avenue, Back Bay Business District sign guidelines will apply.

11.2 BANNERS AND FLAGS National, state and municipal flags may be flown from existing flagpoles or brackets without review by the commission, provided they are no larger than 24 square feet. Banners may be appropriate on institutional buildings. Commercial sign banners are not appropriate.

11.3 MARKETING AND CONSTRUCTION SIGNS Temporary marketing and construction signs may be installed for a period of 6 months, renewable at the discretion of the commission. Such signs shall be limited to one sign per building, and may be freestanding in the front yard, attached to construction scaffolding, or located inside a window. They may be no larger than 6 square feet, and, if freestanding, no higher than 54". Materials should be wood or metal, painted no more than three colors. Signs are not to be illuminated.

11.4 AWNINGS AND CANOPIES Awnings and canopies are not allowed on townhouses with raised stoops, as they tend to obscure architectural detail. Canopies which are traditional in design and materials and dark in color may be appropriate for buildings with entrances at or below grade.

## 12.0 LANDSCAPING

12.1 FRONT YARDS Historical front yard configurations shall not be altered. Where previous renovation has altered the traditional alignment, restoration is encouraged. Extensive excavation of front yards is inappropriate.

12.2 LANDSCAPING Landscaping plans should be reviewed by the commission. Appropriate ground covers for front yards include grass, vines, or low growing plants. Clipped, formal hedges and ornamental iron fences are appropriate edge treatments. The planting of flowering trees in front yards is encouraged. Trees should be dwarf varieties limited in size to 15-20 feet at maturity.

12.3 PLANTER BOXES The seasonal installation of window planter boxes on front and rear elevations is encouraged. Where window grilles are desired, curved grilles may be installed.

## 13.0 IRONWORK

13.1 CRITERIA All new or replacement ironwork should be compatible with the building in style, scale, weight, and detailing. Ironwork should be painted black or an appropriate dark color.







13.2 FENCING Original yard fencing shall be maintained and repaired. Restoration of perimeter fencing of historically appropriate proportion and design is encouraged.

13.3 BALCONIES New balconies are not allowed on primary elevations. Small ornamental balconies may be appropriate on rear elevations.

13.4 WINDOW GRILLES The installation of iron security grilles may be appropriate. Grilles shall be mounted within the window reveal and secured into mortar joints, rather than into the masonry. They shall have pierced horizontal rails or butt-welded joints; overlapping joints are inappropriate. Grilles generally should not protrude beyond the plane of the building; however, bowed grilles designed to support planter boxes may be appropriate.

13.5 DOOR GRILLES The installation of ornamental iron grilles on exterior doors may be appropriate.

13.6 RAILINGS Restoration of original iron or stonework handrails is encouraged. New handrails shall conform to historic precedents and shall be attached at the side of the front steps. Aluminum and other industrial materials are not appropriate.

13.7 FIRE ESCAPES AND FIRE BALCONIES Installation of fire escapes and fire balconies on primary elevations is inappropriate. Fixed diagonal fire stairways are not allowed. Fire egress should be accomplished in the interior wherever possible. Exterior solutions shall be limited to secondary elevations.

#### 14.0 UTILITY EQUIPMENT

14.1 ROOFTOP MECHANICAL EQUIPMENT All mechanical systems should be located on the uppermost roof to minimize their visibility, and shall be incorporated within new volumetric additions. Equipment should be the smallest available, and should be grouped near the center of the roof and mounted as close to the roof as possible. Compliance with noise regulations is required. Exterior ductwork and conduit are inappropriate.

14.2 ANTENNAS The use of master antennas is encouraged. Antennas shall be located on the roof as close to the center as possible so as to be invisible from the street. Antennas shall not exceed 6 feet in any dimension nor extent more than 5 feet above the main roof level. Antennas and all associated equipment including stands, strapping, and fasteners should be dark (preferably black) in color. Antenna cable should be run inside the building. Removal of unused antennas is encouraged.

14.3 COMMUNICATIONS AND SERVICE EQUIPMENT All communications and service equipment is subject to commission review. No telephone, electrical, cable television wiring or other utility equipment shall be installed on the primary elevations of any buildings. All wiring and equipment should be black. Building attachments shall be made between the first and second story on the rear elevations. All connections to individual building units must be made inside the building.



14.4 GUTTERS AND DOWNSPOUTS Gutters, downspouts, flashing, and other visible metalwork on the primary elevation shall be copper. Decorative copper fittings must be preserved. Unpainted mill finish aluminum is inappropriate. Downspouts should be placed inconspicuously and should not obscure significant architectural features.

14.5 AIR CONDITIONERS Individual window air conditioners are permitted on a seasonal basis (May through September) without commission approval. Air conditioning units should protrude minimally; external support brackets are not allowed. Air conditioners shall not disturb the configuration of the window opening or puncture the walls of a building.

14.6 SECURITY CAMERAS Security cameras are allowed only in unusual circumstances (i.e., consulates). Where necessary, they shall be inconspicuous in size, color, and location.

14.7 VENTS Vents are most appropriately located on the uppermost roof in an inconspicuous area. Wall penetration for vents is inappropriate.

## 15.0 PUBLIC AREAS

15.1 CRITERIA Construction work in public areas of the Back Bay should be planned and executed to enhance the historical and architectural character of the district.

15.2 SIDEWALKS AND CURBS Existing granite, brick or concrete sidewalks shall be repaired and restored in kind. Where original materials have been replaced, their restoration is encouraged. Granite curbs shall be retained and reused wherever possible.

15.3 STREET FURNITURE Miscellaneous public street furniture such as traffic and light boxes, vending machines, newspaper boxes, trash receptacles, mail boxes, and telephone panels and booths, poles, meters, etc. are subject to commission review and shall be appropriate in scale and design.

15.4 STREET LIGHTING The installation of historically appropriate lighting fixtures is encouraged. Existing gas lights and historically appropriate fixtures shall be repaired or replaced in kind.

15.5 OPEN SPACE Preservation and enhancement of public open space is important to the architectural district. Design of public spaces should reflect the historic fabric of the area.

15.6 WIRING Additional poles for overhead wires are prohibited. All new wiring shall be installed underground. When streets are disrupted for underground installation or repair, they shall be repaired to match the original condition in materials, color, and texture.

## 16.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bunting, Bainbridge. Houses of the Back Bay, An Architectural History 1840-1917. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1967.

Chase, Sarah and Kim Lovejoy. Brownstone: An Owner's Care and Repair Guide. Boston, MA: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1989. (Brochure available from SPNEA or the Environment Dept.)



## 17.0 GLOSSARY

Exterior work: Any repair, reconstruction, restoration, replacement, rehabilitation, alteration, demolition, or new construction proposed for the exterior of a building which may involve changes in materials, dimensions, design, configuration, texture, color, or visual appearance (includes masonry cleaning, repointing, repair, and painting).

Maintenance and repair: Any work which will involve no change in materials, dimensions, design, configuration, color, texture or visual appearance.

Primary elevation: Also the "facade," the front or street face of a building.

Secondary elevations: The side and rear walls of a building.

Shall: Where "shall" is used in these guidelines, it denotes action which is specifically required to preserve and protect significant architectural features.

Should: Where "should" is used, it denotes a recommended course of action.

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